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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 JEDDAH 000466

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SUBJECT: HAJJ 2009/1430 -- AN AMERICAN'S INSIDE VIEW OF THE
PILGRIMAGE

REF: A. JEDDAH 0131

[1](#)B. JEDDAH 0452

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: Performing the Hajj himself, ConGen Poloff obtained an insider's view of the logistics of the pilgrimage, an event which annually attracts two to three million Muslim worshippers, all converging on the same holy sites during the same five-day interval. The total numbers at this year's Hajj are believed to be slightly less than last year, mainly as a result of concern about contracting H1N1 flu, but nevertheless posed daunting challenges of crowd control and managing enormous, ethnically and economically diverse groups of men, women and children speaking scores of languages and dialects. Despite torrential downpours on Wednesday, November 25, the first day of the pilgrimage, the Saudi Arabian Government (SAG) once again organized and hosted a successful Hajj, claiming to have contained the spread of the H1N1 virus while providing pilgrims with improved, safer facilities, such as the expanded Jamarat Bridge. There were no major mishaps or accidents and no acts of political violence or protest to disrupt what is typically a peaceful procession of world Muslims intent on performing their religious obligation, one of the five pillars of Islam.
END SUMMARY.

RARE DOWNPOUR DISRUPTS FIRST DAY OF HAJJ

[1](#)2. (C) Muslim pilgrims were greeted with rare thunderstorms on Wednesday, November 25, the first day of the Hajj pilgrimage as they performed their rites in the Holy Mosque. Torrential rain soaked worshippers dressed in their Ihrams (white pilgrimage garb) circling the Ka'aba in the ritual known as the "tawaf" (ref A). Although no major injuries were reported on account of the rain, pilgrims, young and old, could be seen slipping and falling as they struggled to make their way around the slick, wet marble floor of the Mecca mosque.

[1](#)3. (C) At the height of the rainstorm the Holy Mosque, usually filled to capacity on the opening day of the pilgrimage, was nearly empty as pilgrims sought shelter in nearby buildings until the showers passed. The Mecca streets flooded with muddy rain water, making it difficult for pilgrims to move around town. However, the rare downpour did

not put much of a damper on the overall pilgrimage. Officials quickly dispatched workers to sweep up the water and by the next morning it was hard to tell that either the mosque or the city of Mecca had seen any rain the previous day.

THE HOLY MOSQUE

¶4. (C) As pilgrims returned to the Holy Mosque on the 3rd and 5th days to perform additional tawafs around the Ka,aba, they encountered the usual enormous Hajj crowds. Pilgrims poured into the mosque at a seemingly endless pace, all jockeying for a position as close to the Ka,aba as physically possible. Accordingly, the ground and lower levels remained jam-packed both days, with many pilgrims on those levels recounting later that they felt as if the sheer force of the crowd moved them around the Ka,aba, with their feet hardly touching the ground. Pilgrims on the two upper floors benefited from more space and the picturesque view below of tens of thousands of worshippers clothed in white moving counterclockwise around the Ka,aba like a slow-moving hurricane.

¶5. (C) Exiting the Mosque is more difficult than entering. Worshippers pushed and shoved through the tight crowd to make their way out; however, no one seemed to lose control and helping hands were offered to those who looked as if they were losing their footing. However, some of the most striking images in the crowded mosque were of men of various nationalities escorting their wives and daughters through the crowds. While the general Islamic practice worldwide is to

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restrict men and women from praying or interacting with each other while inside mosques, the genders are free to interact and worship side-by-side in Islam,s holiest site (Ref A).

H1N1 CONTAINED

¶6. (SBU) Measures taken by the SAG to control the spread of H1N1 seem to have worked as reports that among the estimated 2.5 million pilgrims attending the Hajj, only seventy-three(73) are known to have contracted the flu and only five pilgrims died from associated complications. (NOTE: For perspective, over 200 pilgrims from Indonesia died during the course of the pilgrimage, of natural causes associated with old age or chronic disease. Indonesia sends 200,000 pilgrims every year on Hajj and the mortality rate is typical. END NOTE.) Center for Disease Control official, Dr. Shahul Ibrahim, told Poloff in Mecca on November 28 that &CDC and SAG preparations have paid off since the virus was contained.8 Ibrahim added that Saudi officials were &very pleased with President Obama's statement on Hajj and Eid-al-Adha8 in which efforts by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Saudi Health Ministry to limit the spread of the virus during the Hajj season were singled out for praise. Multi-lingual signs reminding pilgrims to wash their hands to avoid spreading the virus were visible throughout the streets of Mina while an estimated twenty percent of the pilgrims were observed wearing surgical masks as they performed their rites. However, CDC officials warn that there is still a chance that some pilgrims may have contracted the virus on Hajj and could subsequently carry it back to their homelands. SAG health officials are reported to be conducting random H1N1 testing of pilgrims leaving the Kingdom.

JAMARAT BRIDGE EXPANSION -- ENGINEERING SUCCESS

¶7. (SBU) The new state-of-the-art Jamarat Bridge was acclaimed a success at this year's Hajj (ref B). The bridge is perhaps the most important structure at the Hajj from a logistical perspective, as pilgrims must visit the structure three times during the course of the Hajj. The bridge, constructed around three pillars at which pilgrims throw small stones or pebbles in the "stoning the devil" ritual, caused serious problems in past years when pilgrims were crushed in stampedes towards the entrance of what to used to be a single-level structure. The new five-level bridge allows for much smoother movements in out and out of the facility by having five roads on which pilgrims travel to the site lead to each of the five different levels. When one road started to become congested, Saudi officials diverted pilgrims to another road which led to a different level of the structure. This strategy ensured that no level was too crowded at any time. Saudi guards, posted every hundred feet, kept pilgrims moving toward their destination. Pilgrims who had made the Hajj in previous years said the new bridge made performing the rite much easier.

¶8. (SBU) After completing the first round of "stoning the devil," pilgrims are allowed to change out of their Ihram and put on regular clothing for the remainder of the Hajj, a transformative occasion which provides the most striking reminder of the diversity of the participants. As pilgrims made their way to stone the devil at Jamarat on subsequent days, many national delegations traveled in large groups, wearing matching garb and carrying their national flags in a spectacle reminiscent of the parade of nations at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.

COMPLETION OF THE NEW RAILWAY EAGERLY ANTICIPATED

¶9. (SBU) In conversations among themselves pilgrims frequently complained about congestion on the roads between the Hajj sites of Arafat, Muzdalifah and Mina. Many reported spending 5 hours on busses during peak hours between the major sites, all of which are no more than three miles apart.

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With the construction of a railway system connecting the sites underway, the problem has clearly not been ignored. Noticing the railway's support columns already erected at several points, pilgrims expressed excitement about the project, believing the train would dramatically reduce congestion and make future pilgrimages less strenuous. Despite complaints about long bus rides, few pilgrims seemed to allow such difficulties to affect their generally high spirits. When Poloff recalled that he spent 4 hours on a bus, one pilgrim jokingly replied: "I spent 6 hours on a bus last night...you had it good!" The overall mood was to make light of the inconvenience.

¶10. (SBU) On the streets outside the Holy Mosque and at Mina, small-time Saudi entrepreneurs use the pilgrimage as an opportunity to make extra money by offering pilgrims shuttle services. Prices for rides between Mina and the Holy Mosque ranged from 10 to 30 Riyals (\$3-8) during the first day of Hajj; however, prices escalated during the remaining days to levels close to 100 Riyals (\$26), as drivers grasped that pilgrims, tired and exhausted from performing the rites, would pay almost anything to avoid walking.

THE TENT CITY OF MINA

¶11. (SBU) Poloff, along with most pilgrims, spent three nights -- the first and the last two -- in the tent city of Mina, which at first glance resembles a large refugee camp, thousands of large tents arranged next to each other in an area beginning near King Abdulaziz Bridge and stretching east

to the Jamarat Bridge. Camping areas are divided along nationality lines with delegations from each country occupying groups of adjoining tents. Other tent groupings are reserved for organizations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in which members share facilities. Most tents are fitted simply with rugs for sleeping and a small restroom area (toilets and showers). Higher budget delegations, including royal and ministerial parties, tend to have larger, more luxurious tents equipped with small beds and upgraded restrooms. Poorer pilgrims sleep on the streets in any area they can mark out for themselves.

¶12. (SBU) As the flow of traffic slowed in the evenings, some pilgrim areas were transformed into bustling market areas as vendors, both Saudi and expatriate, lined the street selling cheap clothes, jewelery, and souvenirs. On the east side of the tent city, several fast food restaurants had set up temporary facilities catering to pilgrims. One local restaurant chain, Al-Baik, known for its chicken, had three or four locations along the route to the Jamarat and was crowded with customers all day.

WEeping ON ARAFAT

¶13. (SBU) The second day of the Hajj, considered the most important, is known as the Day of Arafat, on which pilgrims head towards the Plain of Arafat, near Mount Arafat where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon. Here worshippers spend the day in tents praying, reading the Quran and reflecting on their lives. Towards the end of the afternoon most pilgrims exited their tents and faced in the direction of the Ka'aba to begin offering supplications until sunset. Believing that all prayers on Arafat are answered, pilgrims pray especially earnestly at this point in the Hajj, many weeping and shaking with emotion while directing silent petitions to the Almighty.

MUZDALIFAH

¶14. (SBU) After leaving Arafat, pilgrims go directly to the site known as Muzdalifah, a flat plain on the open desert. Here pilgrims collect 49 pebbles for the stoning of the devil ritual (7 to stone the big devil on the first visit to the Jamarat and 7 to stone all three devils -- big, medium, small -- on the next two days). After collecting

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their stones most worshippers spend the night sleeping on the desert floor under the open sky. In what looks like a massive camping trip, pilgrims could be seen rushing off their busses in Muzdalifah to find places to sleep. A few pilgrims brought small camping tents; however, the majority were equipped with no more than a sleeping bag or a blanket and some with only their Ihram (the two-piece pilgrimage garb). Surprisingly, there was no attempt to separate the sexes in Muzdalifah; unrelated men and women sometimes slept within two or three feet of each other, with no one objecting or seeming to mind.

INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS HIGHLIGHT RELIGIOUS

AND CULTURAL DIVIDES: SAUDI/AMERICAN, SUNNI/SHIA

¶15. (C) Although there are no formal lectures or religious discussions during the Hajj, many pilgrims gather in tents in Mina and Arafat to hold informal discussions on religious issues. Some Americans said they were disturbed by the comments from a Saudi sheikh who was invited to speak at the

American camp. The Wahhabi sheikh reportedly told the Americans that many of them were not practicing the religion correctly, adding that &a man should never touch a woman who was not a family member and that a woman should never show her face in public.⁸

¶16. (C) Poloff overheard other conversations in the OIC camp, including derogatory remarks about the practices of Shia who were praying nearby. One pilgrim scoffed at the Shia rituals while another pilgrim quoted a famous Quranic verse urging tolerance: &To you be your way, to me be mine.⁸

¶17. (SBU) Despite several threats to do so, Iranian pilgrims did not mount conspicuous protests or demonstrations during the Hajj; however, several papers reported that thousands of Iranians chanted: "Death to America! Death to Israel!" during an address by Ayatollah Muhammad Rishari in the delegation's tent on the Plain of Arafat, in what appears to have been an isolated incident.

HAJJ STATE OF MIND: "EVER AT YOUR SERVICE, O GOD"

¶18. (SBU) Despite having to endure the challenge and discomfort of maneuvering through large crowds and the inconvenience of sleeping in tents and sleeping bags over the course of five days, almost all pilgrims seemed to remain calm and easygoing throughout the pilgrimage. Incidents of personality clashes or ethnic friction were extremely rare. Pilgrims from around the world who had never met frequently developed instant rapport with one another. Large groups making their way through the streets of Mecca and Mina could be heard harmoniously chanting the Hajj chant: "Labaik alahuma labaik" ("Ever at your service, O God, ever at your service"). Even the normally strict, officious Saudi security guards stationed throughout the sites for crowd control seemed to be in the gentle, forbearing Hajj spirit, manifesting patience with those who disobeyed orders and congratulating pilgrims as they completed their rites.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: The Saudi Arabian Government once again demonstrated its knack for efficiently managing the two to three million pilgrims who visit the Kingdom for Hajj. Some of this success is a result of attentiveness to the need for infrastructural improvements such as the Jamarat Bridge and the imminent railway to make pilgrimage more efficient and less arduous. However, the smooth movement of large crowds seems as much due to (1) the easy-going atmosphere that SAG officials promote and (2) the compliant state of mind of the majority of Hajj pilgrims. END SUMMARY.
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